

grieving for the living

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grieving for the living

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Summary

“If you say one word,” she says, her voice low and calm and dangerous, “one single word along the lines of ‘I told you’—”

In which diplomacy cannot solve all problems, and Alina is having a bad night.

Notes

This is set in the same universe as "Something to Believe In", and takes place several months later.

He opens the door of Alina's rooms without knocking, although he does linger on threshold and ask if he can come in. When she gives no response from where she sits in front of the fire on a highbacked chair, posture as perfect as if she sat in state upon her throne, he steps inside and closes the door behind him.

"If you say one word," she says, her voice low and calm and dangerous, "one single word along the lines of 'I told you'—"

"I would never say that."

"You wished me the best of luck dealing with the enemies of Grisha through diplomacy and said to notify you when I needed a plan that would actually protect us."

"Will it help if I remind you that that was months ago, and that I wasn't having the best day?"

"Not if you're still going to gloat."

"Alina." His tone is razor sharp; he is standing before her in an instant. "In what world—*tell* me you don't think I could—they're *dead*, Alina."

"I know," she whispers, covering her hands with her face. "I know."

A group of Grisha children from Fjerda, met at the border by Grisha from the Little Palace to be escorted to Os Alta. They cleared the border safely—all in keeping with the extradition treaty—only to be ambushed further in. By Ravkans. Possibly in the pay of Fjerdans, based on the reports brought back by the only two Grisha to escape with their lives, but even if that is true, the money was likely only a sweetener for a job they already wanted to do.

He can't decide what to do with his hands, if they should rest on her shoulders, if they should stroke her hair, if they need to stay by his sides unless he wants to run the risk of having them slapped away.

"This is your first time," he says.

"With death? Hardly." Her voice is muffled. "I've been a soldier since...I lived through a war. My parents..."

"It's peacetime," he counters. "Nominally. It never is for us, not really, but. It's your first one in peacetime."

"I thought I had gotten so far—"

Her voice shatters, and he's past conscious decision about whether or not to touch her.

"Come here," he says, grasping her arms and hauling her up into his. "Stop fighting it. You need to cry." His hand comes to the back of her head; she slips her hands between their bodies and presses her face into his chest. He wraps an arm around her and crushes her to him. "There you go." She's shaking, coming entirely apart. "Scream."

She jerks against him. “What?”

“It helps. Trust me.” There are days he remembers, centuries ago, long black days full of nothing but screams. Every so often his mind sees fit to remind him of those days in his dreams, and then he doesn’t sleep well for weeks.

Alina stops trying to control her sobs, stops trying to keep quiet. She bunches the fabric of his clothing in her fists and wails, rage and grief coursing through her body like a current.

“That’s it.” He runs his hand up and down her back, between her shoulder blades, trying to say *I’m here, I’m here, I’m here* as loud as he can without actually saying it. Would she have sent for him, he wonders, or come to him, if he hadn’t come to her first? “That’s my girl.”

“I’m not your girl,” she replies, voice deep and rough. “I’m not a girl, I’m the leader of a country—”

“I didn’t mean it like that,” he soothes. He really didn’t, but if she doesn’t want to be called that, he’ll see to it that she’s never called that again, by anyone. “I only wanted—you’re safe, that’s all I meant.”

“I know.” She hiccups. “I know I’m safe, and they’re not, I couldn’t make them—”

“What about the ones you saw today? Did you visit the students?”

He knows she did, knows that as soon as they dealt with the immediate aftermath of the report she canceled all her meetings and went straight to the nursery, then to the training yard to observe afternoon lessons.

He feels her nod. “Who did you see?”

“Alyosha. Natasha. Vasya.” She continues, working her way through the older children, then the younger. Her breathing starts to calm.

Aleksander tucks her head just under his chin.

“There you go,” he says when she’s run out of names. “You won’t decide anything tonight. Try to sleep,” —he hears her snort, which, understandable, “and we’ll come up with a plan in the morning.”

She shoves away from him. “I don’t want your plan. You’ll fan my anger, you’ll advise revenge, you’ll...”

“I’ll make you like me?” It’s a direct hit, and perhaps not a fair one, given the day they’ve both had, but what point is there in prevaricating now?

“Yes,” she whispers. Her face is red and tear-streaked, and he wants to kiss every last tear from her cheeks, wants to kiss her closed eyes and her chapped lips. “I have already made impossible decisions—so many—what if every one I make is—” She sits back down and braces her elbows on her knees, head in her hands. “I didn’t really think it was all worked out, but I still didn’t expect...”

“You’re not meant to expect it,” he says, sitting on the floor in front of her, cross-legged. Something about that makes him feel much younger than his years. “It’s a terrible thing to expect.”

“But I have to, don’t I? In order to protect them.”

“Maybe. I haven’t figured out another way. But you might. I’ve seen you do so many impossible things.” She sniffs, and wipes her face with her sleeve. “Let me run you a bath,” he suggests, voice soft. “Or heat the samovar.” She doesn’t say anything for a few moments, just continues scrubbing at her face. “Solnyshka.” He reaches for her hands. “Look at me, Alina.”

She allows him to fold her hands into his and raises her head to look at him.

“So worried about becoming like me,” he murmurs, one thumb rubbing back and forth across her palm. “Don’t you ever worry I’ll become like you?”

She frowns at him, a question.

“I said I wanted to believe in you,” he continues. “It follows that I might actually start. Maybe I already have. So we can figure it out together, if you can try to stop worrying that I’m going to pull you headlong into indiscriminate murder.”

He hears her give a soft little snort. It’s a sound he’s very familiar with, mostly from council meetings. “Don’t think I didn’t notice that modifier.”

He gives her hands a squeeze. “Not alone, hm?”

She squeezes back.

“Now *please* let me—”

“Yes, yes,” she says. “You can run me a bath, and then we’ll have tea. I don’t have the energy to boss you around any further, though.”

“I didn’t expect so. I just think you need someone looking after you tonight.” Noticing her glare, he insists, “There’s no shame in it. Can’t run a country on no sleep and no affection, believe me, I have tried.”

They both get to their feet, and Aleksander turns toward the door to the adjoining bathroom. And then there’s a tug on his hand and he’s spinning back to her, being pulled down for a kiss that is soft and sad and one of the most beautiful things she’s ever given him.

“This will not destroy us,” she says against his lips, and kisses him again, harder. There is ferocity, in her, even in grief.

Saints, he would crawl to the ends of the earth for her. He would do any number of things she would find unconscionable, and what’s more, he’s beginning to think he would refrain from doing those things for the same reason. Is that love, he wonders. Perhaps. He’s still learning.

For tonight he can sit with her while she bathes, make her tea the way she likes it, climb into bed beside her when she asks him to stay and curl himself around her when she snuggles back against him.

No answers tonight, just the two of them.

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